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EXPOSITORY AND PRACTICAL STUDIES ON THE LIFE OF CHRIST

XI. TRUE AND FALSE DISCIPLES

MATT. 7: 15-29¹

I. CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Read this passage over and over until you can feel its rhetorical beauty and power. Then review the course of Jesus' argument. His great theme in the sermon on the Mount is the character and life of his disciples. He has spoken of the qualities which they should possess; he has contrasted their spirit with the pride and empty profession of pharisaism; he has exalted simple trust in God and loving service toward men; and now in conclusion he urges the faithful doing of that which he has taught.

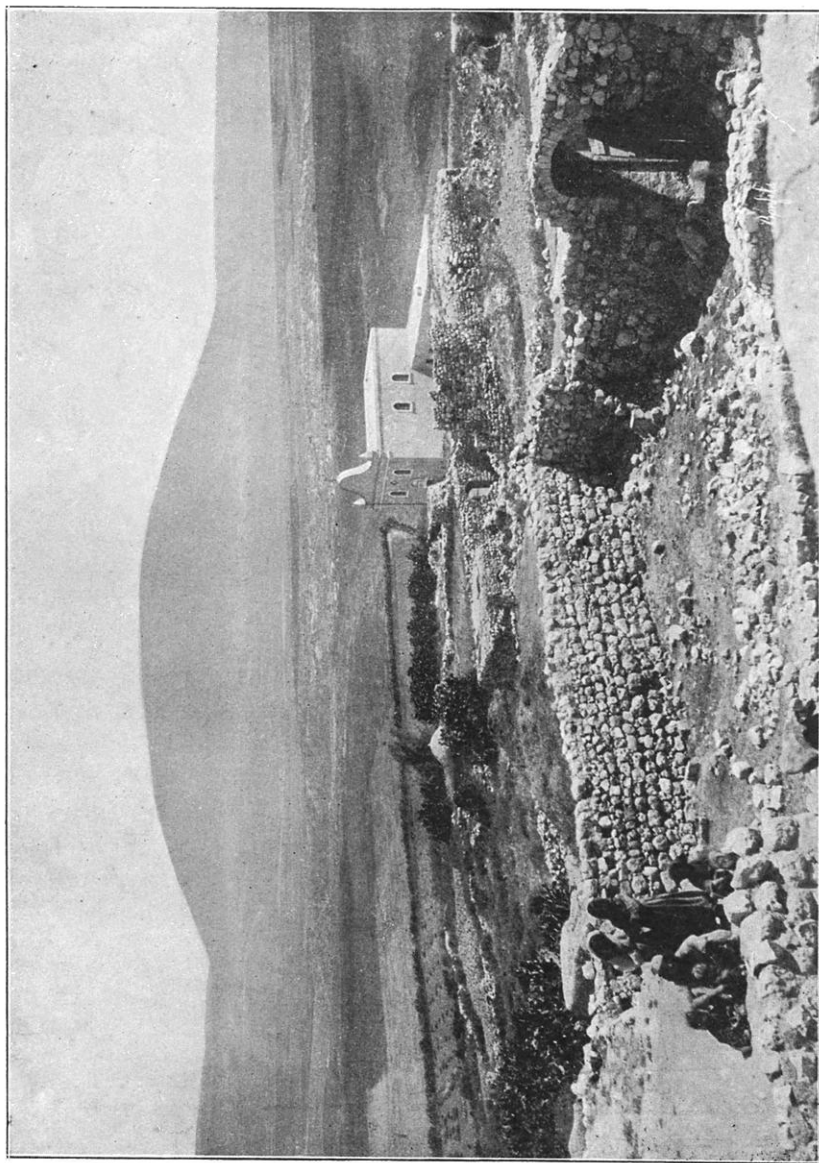
II. EXPOSITION

Jesus warns his disciples against being led astray by false teachers who appear as wolves in sheep's clothing. They are neither to be victims nor imitators of pious frauds. Whether religious teachers, and men in general, are false or true, may be known by their fruits. Every tree bears fruit according to its own nature, and so do men. Disciples should never be censorious (7:1), but they must have discernment, the motive being to know the right way and not to deal out judgment.

But it is possible for men to deceive themselves. Many may say "Lord, Lord," without having vital fellowship with Christ in doing the will of God. When the kingdom of God fully comes—"that day" of Messiah's reign, hoped for by all Israel—there will be many who have prophesied, cast out devils, and performed mighty works, all in the name of Jesus, but who will be unable to enter with him into his glory, because they have never truly shared his spirit. This does not mean that any who really seek to follow Christ will ever come short of his approval; but it is a serious warning against the half-hearted service and insincerity to which we are all liable.

The shifting emphasis here is very suggestive. It has just been said that we are to know men by their fruits; and now it is implied that men cannot be fully known by their outward works. The two thoughts are supplementary. In one case it is said that conduct is an inevitable expression of the inner life; and in the other, that service to Christ can have worth only as it issues from a right spirit within. What Jesus requires, then, is the

¹ International Sunday School Lesson for April 1, 1906.



SITE OF THE VILLAGE OF NAIN, MOUNT TABOR IN THE BACKGROUND

right attitude of heart, and this attitude carried out into action. Doing the will of God is first an attitude and then an act. In this sense he who hears and does "these sayings of mine" will stand the great test that is coming; but he who does not so receive them, idly hearing or saying, and not doing, will surely be swept away.

III. SUGGESTIONS FOR SERMON

This scripture is a rich field for making "points." The ravening wolf, his fleece, the bad trees, cutting them down, the fire, etc., may all be made to mean something. "These sayings of mine" can readily suggest denominational shibboleths, and the awful storm will be on hand to sweep all non-conformists away. Such interpretation is mere jugglery. The lesson is very plain. It is powerfully *implied* that we as disciples of Jesus Christ should seek ever and again to have an inner life that accords with his spirit; and it is expressly *commanded*, by way of solemn warning, that we faithfully perform in conduct and life those things which the word and spirit of Christ enjoin. Thoughtful though kind discernment is necessary; and a final test of our genuineness is coming.

In applying this lesson we do well to recall that its warnings were uttered in view of the religious life and teaching of Jesus' day. They come with equal force to the religious life and teaching of our own time. How much of our worship and "church work" falls short of real service to Christ? How far does insistence upon forms and ceremonies obscure the moral element in faith? One cannot say, but one fears. And the scope of this lesson includes all the activities and relations of a Christian's life. It applies to business, education, politics, social life, just as truly as to the formal services of religion. What profits it though we say "Lord, Lord," in worship and church membership, if we so live that the Master must say at last, "I never knew you?" A new day is dawning when Jesus shall be recognized as Lord over all of life, and every activity and relation of his disciples shall be made a service to him.

The sermon depends on the preacher. To my thinking, this scripture yields the great thought of "genuine discipleship." Presupposing an acceptance of Jesus as Savior and Lord, three qualities are essential to his disciples: *discernment*, *sincerity*, *obedience*. The relation and implication of these ideas open up truths which Christians, and indeed all men, will ever need to hear.

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XII. JESUS AND THE SABBATH

MATT. 12:1-14²

I. CRITICAL QUESTIONS

The faith of some is staggered by apparent differences between the gospels and 1 Sam., chap. 21. If we bear in mind the single intention of Jesus, to call to mind the conduct of David in eating the priestly bread; if we look at the whole matter with simple common-sense, in human rather than scholastic fashion; then the differences are seen to be insignificant as relates to the main question of Jesus' purpose, and the departures from the story as told in Samuel are plainly immaterial.

II. INTERPRETATION

The disciples' hunger is not to be overemphasized. Rather, following some field-path on their way to or from the synagogue, they naturally plucked and ate the grain beside them without thinking of any rabbinic prohibitions. It is too often assumed that the strict rules of the pharisaic doctors were universally observed. Probably many of these rules were mere paper, no more observed by the people than are many of our municipal ordinances. That the multitude neither obeyed nor even knew the law, i. e., of rabbinism, is evidenced by John 7:49. Peter recognizes that the yoke of the Pharisees was one which the Jews had not been able to bear (Acts 15:10).

In the phrase "Son of Man" the emphasis is to be laid on the unique perfection of the humanity of Jesus, which indeed issues in a sense of his divinity. If his teaching is that he is the lord of the sabbath by virtue of his divine messiahship, in his distinction from mankind, then we must assume that the disciples are justified by some word which he has spoken to them rather than by the natural Christian impulse of their own life with him; and the sabbath is not left for the free interpretation of developing life, but is held within the limits of a strictly historical definition, which, however divine, cannot free itself from being a limitation. This was not Jesus' way. The free play of the divine spirit in the souls of man, guided by the often unconscious principles of thought and growth, is what Jesus depends upon for that definition of the things of God which he well knows will be needed in the coming ages (John 16:12, 13; Mark 13:11). The sabbath recognized by such a spirit is not merely an institution ordained by a definite law of a certain period, but a spiritual institution connected with the spiritual nature of man; therefore capable of growth and demanding expansion as that nature develops along its true and God-directed course.³

²International Sunday School Lesson for April 8, 1906.

³On this question of the Son of man see Professor Adeney's illuminating articles, *Biblical World*, December, 1905, pp. 449 ff.

According to strict rabbinism, it was not lawful to heal on the sabbath. Jesus brushes away the web of pharisaic sophistry by supposing a practical case. If a man's one sheep were in trouble, the man would not pause over sophisms; he would lift the sheep out. It is rank absurdity, rabbis or no rabbis, to think it wrong to do as much for a man. The rabbi might deny that it was right to save the sheep; but the man would do it, and let the rabbi talk. Jesus appeals to common-sense. It is, of course, right to do good deeds on the sabbath day.

This is the final break with the pharisaic party, whose spirit was in general control of the synagogues.

III. SUGGESTION FOR SERMON: THE SABBATH

1. The institution of the sabbath. Its interesting history as a Jewish and Christian institution. The great place that it has held in religious thought and practice.

2. The value of the sabbath. Jesus' attitude indicates his recognition of the sabbath as an institution founded in man's need as a spiritual being.

3. The continuance of the sabbath. Jesus assumes, as a matter of course, that the sabbath is to be preserved, but on a higher plane. It is to subserve man's highest interests, to be his boon and blessing.

4. The observance of the sabbath. No studied observance of ancient forms will avail, but only the living power of the spirit of service and devotion. The spirit of Christ does not lead to a denial of the sabbath, but to a wider fulfilment of its promise; not to cheap amusement, but to the doing of better works.

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XIII. JESUS' POWER OVER DISEASE AND DEATH

LUKE 7:1-17⁴

I. EXPOSITION

The "sayings" which Jesus had just completed were the Sermon on the Mount. "Capernaum" was a town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, whose exact location is now in dispute. It was a strategic center for the missionary operations of Jesus. "Centurion": a Roman military officer, who commanded fifty to one hundred men, and thus corresponded in rank to the modern captain. "Dear" is primarily a term of valuation. He was a personal, confidential, and loved bond-servant. "Sick": Matthew informs us that the malady was palsy, very painful in character. "Elders of the Jews": probably elders of the town and not of

⁴International Sunday School Lesson for April 15, 1906.

the synagogue. From Matthew's account we would infer that the centurion came in person. "Worthy": if he was not a proselyte, he certainly had deep sympathies with the monotheistic and ethical faith of Israel. From men and women like him Christianity won its first recruits in the empire. If Tel Hum is the ancient Capernaum, we have the ruins of the marble synagogue he built. His character is indeed most admirable; he was open-minded, affectionate, generous, humble, courageous, believing. "He marveled": surprise was possible even to the Son of God, because the limitations of our humanity were upon him. In the Roman soldier there was a spiritual capacity not to be found in Israel. Matthew records the words which mounted to the lips of Jesus wherein he predicted the transfer of spiritual primacy from Israel to the gentiles.

"Nain," means "Fair," and was descriptive of the beauty of the little town on a hilltop some twenty-five miles from Capernaum. "One that was dead": there was special pathos in the fact that he was the only son of a widow. It was customary to bury a corpse soon after death. He was borne on a board, or perhaps in an open wicker basket, to a sepulcher on the hillside, where he was laid in a niche. The sorrowing mother was accompanied by friends and hired mourners, whose loud, shrill lamentations filled the air. "Arise": it is the word we hear again in the chamber of Jairus' daughter. As the youth obeyed the word of power, fear and thanksgiving fell upon all the company. And great was the rapture of the mother, as she received her son, twice given. "A great prophet": they failed to recognize him as the Christ.

II. SUGGESTED TEACHING: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE POWER OF JESUS OVER DISEASE AND DEATH

1. *The supremacy of the spiritual.*—Personality is the final and dominant fact. Matter as a form of force is the expression of will, and will inheres in personality. This is Jesus' explanation of his miraculous power—"The Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works." The indwelling of God means a divine and masterful personality. In the character of Jesus there are forces able to dominate disease and even death. To the extent we are like Jesus, we share his dominion.

2. *The worth of the physical.*—Jesus had no sympathy with the Greek idea of the inherent evil of matter. God at the first looked upon the world-order, and, behold, it was very good. The mental and spiritual life is closely correlated with the physical. The soul dwells best in a temple clean and strong.

3. *The revelation of the heart of God.*—Jesus interprets God to us. His

attitude toward human suffering is the disclosure of the emotions of God. Disease and bereavement awakened compassion in Jesus. Thus miracles of healing, as the expression of the divine pity, are a part of the gospel. They are not merely seals; they are contents.

4. *The symbol of the redemption of the soul.*—Miracles are parables in the realm of the visible declaring what Jesus can do for the souls of men. John always uses the term "signs." The meaning of the raising of Lazarus is in the words: "I am the resurrection and the life." All the synoptic writers record the saying: "That ye may know that the son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (he said unto him that was palsied), I say unto thee, Arise."

5. *The foretoken of the heavenly life.*—God can use suffering to chasten and develop character. But the ultimate ideal is in the prediction: "Neither shall there be any more pain." Pasteur foretold the day when all bacterial disease would disappear. Science works with religion to bring in the better time. Death itself is shorn of its terror when we recognize it as a normal experience, a necessary incident in the progress of the soul. At all events, in the world to come the victory of the spirit will be complete, and neither pain nor death shall enter there.

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XIV. THE SINNER'S FRIEND IN THE PHARISEE'S HOME

LUKE 7:36-50⁵

I. CRITICAL QUESTIONS

1. Why does Luke tell this story? To illustrate Jesus' method (vs. 34). He lives with people, seeks the Pharisee in a natural way at a meal, reveals himself even there as the friend of an outcast but penitent woman. He dares to break the law of convention to save the law of love.

2. Is this anointing to be identified with that by Mary, the sister of Lazarus (Matt. 26:7; Mark 14:8; John 12:3)? The points in common are the anointing, and the name of the host, Simon; but this is a very common name. The points of difference are numerous. Luke's story antedates the open break with the Pharisees, the anointing in Bethany is "anointing for burial;" the subject in one case is a "sinner," in the other a devoted disciple; offense in one case is given the host, on account of the woman's reputation; in the other, to Judas, on account of the waste. A repetition is not surprising if the act is sacramental. The devoted Mary may well adopt the humble yet loving service to express

⁵International Sunday School Lesson for April 22, 1906.

her deepest feelings, using the same costly spikenard, and using her crown of glory which has never served an evil purpose (cf. 1 Peter 3:3 and Rom. 6:19).

3. The traditional identification of the "woman that was a sinner" with Mary Magdalene, who is mentioned in the next chapter (8:2), is without foundation.

II. EXPOSITION

Vs. 36. The motives of the Pharisee were such as "impel superior folk, who desire to be considered both liberal and wise," to entertain distinguished men. Simon's social and religious position permitted him to attempt to patronize a popular teacher.

The first scene presents a weeping woman (vss. 37, 38). Surprise is felt, not because a woman looks on at a feast, but because this woman, a "bad" woman, has made a "scene." Her purpose was to anoint the feet of Him who had brought good tidings to her soul, but, with love and shame, hope and fear, burning in her heart, she burst into a flood of tears, and her quickly loosened hair serves as a towel for the feet she would honor. The next verse (39) must be thought away as an "aside," "heard" only by Jesus—Simon did not know he heard it.

The second scene (vss. 40-43) presents Jesus engaging Simon with a little story. Simon is made judge as to a probable psychological reaction in the case of two debtors who have been forgiven unequal indebtedness with equal freeness. As might have been expected, Simon makes a correct judgment, all unaware that he is judging himself.

The third scene (vss. 44-47) brings the application in telling antitheses: much love for coldness, tears for bath, kisses on the feet for the customary kiss on the cheek, costly spikenard for common oil. It has all happened not without a cause. The lack of real hospitality of the patronizing host, and the mortifying "scene," as it appeared to the self-contained but inwardly disgusted Pharisee, find their explanation in the law of cause and effect. Little sense of sin, little sense of forgiveness; little sense of forgiveness, little love; little love, little light; for Simon can only see a low motive in the woman, and defect in Jesus.

The fourth scene (vss. 48-50). Jesus blesses the woman for her faith, as he has honored her love, and sends her away into the path of peace. He had been quick to resent evil thoughts concerning the woman, but now he ignores evil thoughts of himself. Christ's statement that her faith had saved her ought to relieve all doubt as to the meaning of vs. 47, where love seems to precede forgiveness as its cause. The context requires that love should be the result, not the ground, of forgiveness.

III. SUGGESTION FOR SERMON: CHRIST'S METHOD AND OUR METHOD

1. Jesus was simple and genuinely natural. His naturalness still seems to us supernatural. He is not afraid of the judgment of the Pharisee. No more is he afraid of the touch of the woman. He talks elsewhere to a learned rabbi by night, but he also reveals deepest truth to a Samaritan woman. The world today is waiting for leaders who can be good without being unreal.

2. It was for this reason that Jesus could not be patronized by those who have social position. This very social position is a fabric of unreality, the real values of life have been pressed into the background to give place for human conventions which have in them more of pride than of love. Jesus therefore cannot be flattered by a wise old ruler (John 3:2), nor by a rich young ruler, nor by a self-complacent and superior host. His right to teach and comfort cannot be abridged by inane conventions. Do we not need such singleness of purpose?

3. Great need stirs his great compassion. These poor outcast things are treated as if they were dumb animals, kindly, tolerantly, but soullessly. His great heart is outraged at the sight of the image of God crushed into the mire, as the cart wheel might crush a diamond.

4. It is idle for any church, however intellectually orthodox, or any individual, however socially correct, to name the name of Christ without adopting the method of Christ.

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XV. THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

MARK 4:1-20⁶

I. CRITICAL QUESTIONS

The absence of parables from the apocryphal writings, from the epistles, and from the fourth gospel makes their use in the synoptics an emphatic pedagogic of Jesus. To this emphasis, moreover, the exquisite nature of the analogies between things seen and things unseen adds the distinction of certainty that we are in contact with Jesus' actual words. The parable before us is significant because it is one of the three recorded by Mark, the chronicler of events rather than of discourses, chosen from the thirty or more in Matthew and Luke.

Furthermore, this parable, belonging to the narrative group, is unimpaired by the characteristic embarrassment of the synoptists regarding the purpose, and hence the nature, of Jesus' parables. Unwilling to

⁶International Sunday School Lesson for April 29, 1906.

believe that the Savior of the world would relate plain commonplaces drawn from the events of everyday life for the purpose of serving as aids to common understanding, thinking themselves the initiated into the kingdom's "mysteries," they seemed to allegorize his words, turn them into dark sayings, and teach that his purpose was to veil truth from the uninitiated. Observe that he addressed the inner circle in parables (Mark 2:19-22); that in the present passage the heart-types depicted in the four soils are expected to understand him (Mark 4:33).

II. EXPOSITION

An interview with Jesus was desired by Mary and her family upon an autumn day, in the second period of his Galilean ministry, while he was teaching in a Capernaum house. Adroitly using their claim to press home to his auditors his fraternal love for those not attached to him by blood, he detained his kindred without till he could meet them alone. Then he would have set forth in the boat, but the counter-claim of the gathering crowd so appealed to him that he cast anchor, faced their wonder-look, eager for a political liberator, or the touch of healing, and in vivid, ich, and lucid manner interpreted their need, and task, and told his story.

In his discovery of the futility of words, ever so true, he finds a sympathetic experience in his favorite prophet (Isa. 6:9, 10) and an apologetic in this parable of the soils.

Fellahin, living in villages, not on the land, "went forth" to sow the field. Note Jesus' world-view in "the field is the world;" also the universality of the heart-types. The seed is sown on unplowed ground and afterward poked in with a wooden plow. The "wayside" caravan paths that cross the unfenced plain of Esdraelon, the wheat-field of lower Galilee, the feeding-place of crows and migratory birds from Asia, serve for one heart-type, the secularized, Hellenistic Sadducee. The "rocky ground," undecomposed limestone, with inadequate covering of mutable soil, pictures the changeable crowd. The indefinite word "thorns" may mean any of fifty thorn-bearing growths that preoccupy and crowd the soil and rob of fruitage the good seed. But the greater part is good soil with room and strength. And Jesus, the great optimist, still trusted human hearts.

III. SUGGESTION FOR SERMON

1. The seed is the Word: Jesus believed his own words, and committed them, not to books, but to human hearts, by lake and well, in cottage, synagogue, and temple. In the synagogue he found illustrations

from the book of the synagogue; in the open he expounded the analogies of nature. His words lulled the sorrowful, removed the sting of disease, robbed adversity of disappointment, revealed death as ally, unveiled God. Discriminate in the confusion of words between religious formulæ and Jesus' message. His was the language of the heart and of life.

2. The soil is the human heart: It is really the Parable of the Soils, an answer to an implied challenge, "Why are your words ineffective?" He lays the burden of defeat upon the condition of human hearts. The heart is still the same and his keen analysis of types still applies.

a) The road-bed soil—the heart that has been hardened by the traffic of time, the half-pagan Sadducee—is still here. He is our hard-headed business man, too busy to look after his Father's business.

b) The rock-bed soil—the weather-vane heart, unlike the compass needle that swings to the polar star of truth if released. This is our weakly religious type, without co-ordinated muscular activity.

c) The thorn-bed soil—the preoccupied heart, crowded with the briars of temporal care, greed for gain, selfishness, the root of lust and all false growths.

d) The good soil—the childlike heart, plastic, teachable, open, the curtains of the soul still raised.

3. Good seed in good soil: This is the word made flesh, a true life. Men will pass unmoved learned dialectics in theology; they are still touched into life by a heart indwelt of eternal love. The measure of the life-power of a vegetable has been ascertained by harnessing it while growing in steel thongs. Its expansive power is tons. The living word in a living human heart is the power of God unto salvation.

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XVI. THE PARABLE OF THE TARES

MATT. 13: 24-30; 36-43⁷

I. EXPOSITION

We have no means of knowing just when or where this parable, found only in Matthew, was spoken. It belongs to the general class of illustrations used by Jesus to set forth the eschatological nature of the kingdom of God. It clearly presupposes the current Jewish belief relative to the end of the evil and the beginning of the messianic age. In it, as in the current belief, there is the recognition of the day of judgment as marking the end of the one and the beginning of the other. In its insistence upon the teaching that man ought not to assume divine prerogatives of judg-

⁷International Sunday School Lesson for May 6, 1906.

ment it is like Matt. 7:1; in its insistence upon the necessity of awaiting the judgment for the adjustment of moral evils it is parallel with Mark 4:26-29, as well as the other sayings of Jesus which have to do with the coming of the Son of man and the attendant judgment. In interpreting it one must recognize the limitations set by Jesus in his own interpretations. By comparing the interpretation with the parable itself, it will appear that Jesus gives meaning only to those matters which are absolutely necessary to its dominant analogy; viz.: as men wait till the harvest before separating the tares from the grain, so the servants of God can wait till the judgment day for the punishment of evil men. In the light of this analogy Jesus does not find it necessary to interpret the attractive suggestion that the tares look like the wheat (vs. 29), but, on the contrary, elaborates the element of final judgment. It will be advisable, for the purpose of interpretation, to make two columns, the one of the elements of the parable, and opposite each the interpretation given by Jesus.

II. SUGGESTIONS FOR SERMON: THE CERTAINTY OF THE FINAL TRIUMPH OF RIGHTEOUSNESS OVER EVIL

1. The world as it now exists is a sad mixture of good and evil men. The good men, in so far as they are Christians, profess an unconquerable faith that ultimate righteousness rather than wickedness shall be supreme. The faith is often sadly tried by the presence of evil men in apparently the very best environment.

2. The first impulse of good men is to attack the evil men. Jesus recognized this necessity of opposing evil both in word and act. He most vigorously assailed the Pharisees, but he saw also its danger. This zeal for righteousness is very apt to grow into a spirit of persecution or anger. Necessary as it is for us to express the principles of love in the proper protection of ourselves from criminal classes, whether evil or "respectable," it is just as necessary for us to hold fast to the belief that the eradication of evil rests ultimately with God. Unless a man believes that evil in society will ultimately be crushed, he distrusts God.

3. The day of judgment as a particular point in the future was the pictorial way in which the Jews conceived the defeat and punishment which God was to inflict upon the evil men and evil forces. There is no truth truer than that contained in this picture. But the entire experience of humanity shows that punishment is present as well as future, in actual social life as well as beyond the grave. Neither element should be under-emphasized, but God's hand should be seen in both. During the past few months the American people has been seeing one sort of judgment day in

the exposure and punishment, both by law and by relentless public opinion, of venality and corruption and dishonesty. God works in humanity, still making the wrath of man to praise him.

4. There is need today, in addition to the recognition of the punitive working of God through society, to recognize also the consequence of evil in terms of immortality. Because we see that the description of future punishment is often figurative, we by no means make the punishment itself figurative. That is as real as humanity. Any preaching will lose power which belittles or overlooks the fact that man is immortal, and that the great laws of God are just as operative in the world of immortality as in the world of mortality. The Christian must remember that he stands for this element of the divine government quite as truly as for the other truth that misery is the inevitable future outcome of sin in present society.

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